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THE ROLLRIGHT STONES

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THE ROLLRIGHT STONES

HISTORY & LEGENDS
IN PROSE & POETRY

BY

F. C. RICKETT

WITH

5 ILLUSTRATIONS

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Photo—Percy Simms.

THE KING STONE

FOR several miles the counties of Oxford and Warwick, are bounded by a narrow straight roadway. From the "Cross Hands" to the Edge Hills, this road follows the northern boundary of the Cotswold country. To the north west lie the fertile valleys and plains of the Warwickshire Feldon country, whilst eastwards the ground gently slopes to the valley of the Cherwell. The ridge thus divides the watersheds of the Thames and Severn.

This road, in places now only a grass track (as between Traitors Ford and the Banbury—Shipston main road), is probably one of the oldest in England. Long before the Roman Legions made their wonderful arterial roads—perhaps even before the fair haired Celts swarmed over Britain—this roadway stretched across the country from the neighbourhood of Gloucester (the Ermine Way) to Northampton. On the north end of the Edge Hills, the road now runs along what was once the trench of a British Camp, and from there to the Rollrights, there are innumerable traces of that early British civilization, about which we know so little. Forts and Barrows there are in plenty, but all other remains are dwarfed in interest by the stone circle known as the Rollright or Rollrich Stones.

Situated on the very edge of the ancient roadway, a short mile from the busy main road that connects the industrial midland towns with Oxford and the South Coast, weather beaten with the storms of centuries, they stand as a monument to that race of men who lived in this England of ours, whilst still the Pharaohs ruled in Egypt, and Phoenician and Greek were venturing their fragile ships past the Pillars of Hercules, and along the stormy Atlantic coasts.

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The Circle itself consists of about 60 stones (legend says they cannot be counted) of all shapes and sizes, mostly still standing embedded in the earth, the tallest being 7 feet 6 inches in height. Beyond the road, standing alone, is the monolith known as the King Stone, whilst east of the Circle is a Cromlech called the "Whispering Knights." An interesting feature is that several of the stones have a small round hole bored through the thickness. One such "peep hole" faces due East, looking towards the "Whispering Knights," whilst two others are in a direct line with the King Stone. The holes undoubtedly served some purpose connected with the use of the Temple.

And what was the use to which this building erected with so much toil was dedicated. That it had a religious significance seems certain, but to what Divinity it was dedicated, whether it was simply a place of worship, or had a deeper meaning, and a wider use, is matter for conjecture. It is possible—nay probable—that these circles were, in addition to their religious use, a centre where the elders and chiefs of the tribes, met to make laws, give judgments—in fact they were the centres of Government and Justice.

Let us for a moment allow our imagination to wander. The circle is filled with men clad in the skins of wild animals, all bearing arms, perhaps flint tipped spears, or more likely swords of bronze. A rough uncouth crowd they would appear to modern eyes—long haired, bearded, with bodies and faces smeared with woad, or other colouring

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matter. Around the altar stand the Priests and Tribal chiefs. The High Priest (or Arch Druid) raises his hand and blesses the gathering. Then one steps from amidst the crowd, and standing before the altar, tells how a neighbouring tribe has ravaged his land, and carried away his women and cattle. He demands revenge; a hundred voices shout approval, and a hundred swords are raised aloft. But the Priest must finally decide, and the portents for success be learnt by sacrifice. Let us not dwell too long on this scene, for it is probable the sacrifice is a human being, perhaps a prisoner captured in a former raid.

Let us call up another scene—a scene of joy, with men and women and children decked with flowers welcoming the sun as he rises behind “The Whispering Knights” proclaiming the end of winter and birth of another year. Or before the altar stand a youth and maid whom the priest is making man and wife: or yet again, the Circle is filled with mourners, whilst the priests chant a hymn over the corpse of a war leader, ere he is carried to the round “Barrow” on the hill top. All this may have happened within this circle of stones, now so weather beaten and deserted.

It is a commonly accepted belief that the Stones were a Temple of the sungod or goddess, and though of this we have no actual proof, that the building had some purpose connected with the sun seems certain. That peep hole facing east, may it not have been the rough means of fixing the time of year, by which the priest could tell the tribe the time had come to till the ground or sow the

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seed. On a certain day which we now term the Spring Equinox, the sun, seen through this hole, would perhaps rise exactly behind the "Whispering Knights," thus enabling the priest to correctly announce the time of year. The exact age of the Circle is unknown, but we can safely presume it to be contemporary with Stonehenge, which astronomical experts fix at 1680 B.C. This would approximate roughly with the Bronze Age in Britain. It is fairly certain therefore, that the Temple is between three and four thousand years old, and we can only marvel how these primitive folk with their crude tools and imperfect knowledge of engineering, can have quarried these huge blocks of stone, conveyed them across undrained marsh and moorland, and raised them to their erect position firmly embedded in the earth. As the tallest stone is 7 feet 4 inches high and 3 feet 2 inches broad, the original Temple must have consisted of a complete circular wall at least 8 feet high, each stone being 4 feet in breadth. The diameter of the Circle is 107 feet from North to South, and 104 feet from East to West.

The Stones have now been acquired by the Office of Works, and are safe at least from the deprivations of man, though still exposed to the disintegration of the weather.

Let us hope that this Temple of a forgotten race of men, some of whose blood may still mingle with that of Celt, Roman, Saxon, and Norman, in the veins of the modern Englishman, will still stand on its windswept Cotswold ridge, unspoilt by the proximity of present day buildings and machinery, which seem so transient and futile beside this hoary monument.



Photo—Percy Simms.

THE CIRCLE.

THE ROLLRIGHT STONES.

THE LEGENDS.

It is of course inevitable that a hoary monument of this type, about which we know so little, and of which our immediate ancestors knew less, would be the venue of many legends, and it is always interesting to speculate on the source of these stories, and try to discover if any truth lies beneath the superstructure of miracle.

It is difficult to believe that a story such as that as the King and his army being turned to stones, has not some foundation in fact, however impossible the whole legend may be as at present told. It is quite probable that an invading army did once reach this spot, was here defeated and its leader slain. The Stones, hitherto unnamed, would be given a title to commemorate the event, such as the King's Circle, and Tom Burgess in an interesting article on the Stones, in "Historic Warwickshire" gives a possible derivation of the name, from the Gaelic "Roithlean an Rign" signifying the "Circle of the King."

Other authorities have connected the legend with the Viking Rollo, who founded the Dukedom of Normandy, and it is quite probable that on one of his maurading expeditions he fought a battle in

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this neighbourhood. It is more likely however, that this connection has arisen simply on account of the similarity of name. The witch is sometimes associated with Mother Shipton, obviously inspired by the nearby Shipton under Wychwood. However, it is fairly safe to presume that the Circle is centuries older than either the name or the legend, whether these do or do not, commemorate a definite event.

The story of the removal and return of the King Stone, has the appearance of some basis of truth. It is not improbable that a Lord of the Manor of Rollright took the Stone to make a bridge, and then for some reason replaced it. Two or three generations of village gossips would account for the details. Or, of course, his Lordship may have dined that night "Not wisely but too well," and have attributed the ensuing nightmare to a spiritual visitation.

The tale of the baker's loaves may also be founded on fact. There are so many broken pieces of stone lying about, and the larger stones are so split, that it would be easy to take one stone for two, and on going round a second time find and count a piece of stone previously overlooked.

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The leaning positions of the stones called the "Whispering Knights," is sufficient to account for the tale of their conspiring treason; and of course, all circles, whether of stone or fungi, were to our ancestors the haunts of Fairies, Pixies, Gnomes and such like supernatural beings, and the scenes of their midnight revels.

We have no time for these beliefs in this bustling matter-of-fact age, when every event is statistically recorded, but it is well occasionally to remember Hamlet's words to Horatio—"There are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

And when the summer moon shines on the Circle, casting long shadows across the grass, even though we cannot see the "Little Folk" dancing, we cannot help feeling a sense of awe, when we think of the generations and races of mankind that have come and gone, whilst these same Stones, silent and alone, have stood like sentinals watching the ephemeral pageant, eternally guarding their own secrets.

But the Legends themselves await to be told. Prose is too harsh for these fancies—they must be written in verse, as, perchance, they were sung years ago by the wandering minstrels.



Photo—Percy Simms.

THE WHISPERING KNIGHTS.

THE ROLLRIGHT LEGENDS,

I.

"Living Stock and Dead Rock !

"What is this I hear ?

"Men of battle marching

"Filling all with fear."

A king stood in the doorway,

A mighty man of war !

His wing-helmed knights behind him

Sons of the War-God Thor.

"Living Rock and Dead Stock !

"Whom art thou I pray ?

"Whither art thou marching

"With this bold array ?"

"North I march my army

"Of warriors renowned

"Conquering all before me

"Till King of England crowned."

"Now give me, Witch, an answer,

"Now rede thou me my doom !

"When wolves and vultures fatten

"On the corpses in the broom."

"When heroes deal in sword play

"How shall the battle go ?

"Will spear and javelin shatter

"The shield-wall of the foe ?"

"Living Rock and Alder Tree !

"Battle thou shalt never see

"Thou shalt King of England be

"When Long Compton thou shalt see."

THE ROLLRIGHT STONES.

Halted then his army,
Forth alone went he
Striding up the hill side
Long Compton there to see.

But ere he reached the ridgeway
Whence Long Compton he could view
Before him stood the witchwife
And spake these words of rue.

“Stand Stock and stand Stone,
“King of England art thou none.
“Hoary stones for ever be
“I myself an Alder Tree.”

Stock still stood the war-king
His warm blood froze to stone.
On Cotswolds wind-swept upland
He stands to this day alone.

Behind him stand his army
Stones weather-worn and grey.
Nor ever shall their war-cry
Ring o'er the hard fought fray.

His knights stand in a cluster
Changed by the Witches spell;
Treason plotting against him
When doom on them befell.

Silent, remote, for ages,
Weather beaten and gray,
Army and Knights and King Stone
Have stood there to this day.

LEGENDS OF THE ROLLRIGHT.

II.

The Lord of the Manor of Rollright one day,
Determined the King Stone to carry away.
“O'er the Rollright brook it will make a sound bridge,
“More useful by far than stuck up on this ridge.”
So he called his men, who with pickaxe and spade,
Round the base of the King Stone a deep trench made.
Then with ropes they encircled the massive block,
And a horse attached, to pull over the rock.
They sweated and struggled, they hauled, and they shoved,
But never an inch had the giant stone moved.
Then they fetched two more horses and tried again,
And another two—it was labour in vain.

The Stone still their utmost exertions defied
'Till a sixth horse they fetched, and once more tried.
Then at last the stone moved, then over it fell,
With labour they dragged it down into the dell.
On the grass by the manor they let it lay
Intending to place o'er the brook the next day.

BUT

In the dead of night
At the midnight stroke
In an awful fright
His Lordship awoke.
Fearsome shrieks and groans
Sounded all around,
And unearthly moans
His senses astound.
On the lea outside
In the bright moonlight
His Lordship espied
A horrible sight.
For there on the Stone
Sat a huge Black Cat
And not all alone,
For just by her sat
An ugly old Witch!
Whilst Goblins around
All black as the pitch
Crawled over the ground.

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Oh ! then frightened indeed was the Rollright squire
As he listened and looked at that ghostly choir.
When the Witch on a broomstick vanished from sight
And Goblins and Cat disappeared in the night,
He gurgled and cried, and fell down in a swoond
And there on the floor the next morning was found.

Now when he had dressed, he went out to the Stone,
Where harmless and still, on the grass it lay prone.
“ If it takes ev’ry horse there is in the land
“ The Stone in its ancient position shall stand !
“ For never again will I pass such a night,
“ Or see in the moonlight so gruesome a sight ;
“ If six horses it took to pull it *down* here,
“ Six more will be wanted to pull it *up* there.”
So he sent out his men the horses to seek
The big ones and small ones, the strong and the weak !
And when he’d collected a dozen or more,
He engirdled the stone with ropes, as before
Then he took the first horse and hitched to the Stone,
Which he’d no sooner done, than it went off alone
Up the hill at a gallop, King Stone and all
Clattering and bouncing along like a ball.
In a very short time they reached the hill top
When the horse, on its own, came to a dead stop.
One jump, and the Stone in the hole stood upright
As ever it stood, ’till the previous night.

So up there on the ridgeway they let it stay
Where it stands all alone to the present day.
And the Lord of the Manor that night slept sound,
With no Witches or Goblins howling around.
But from that very time ’till the day he died
A Black Cat, big or small, he could not abide.

ROLLRIGHT LEGENDS,

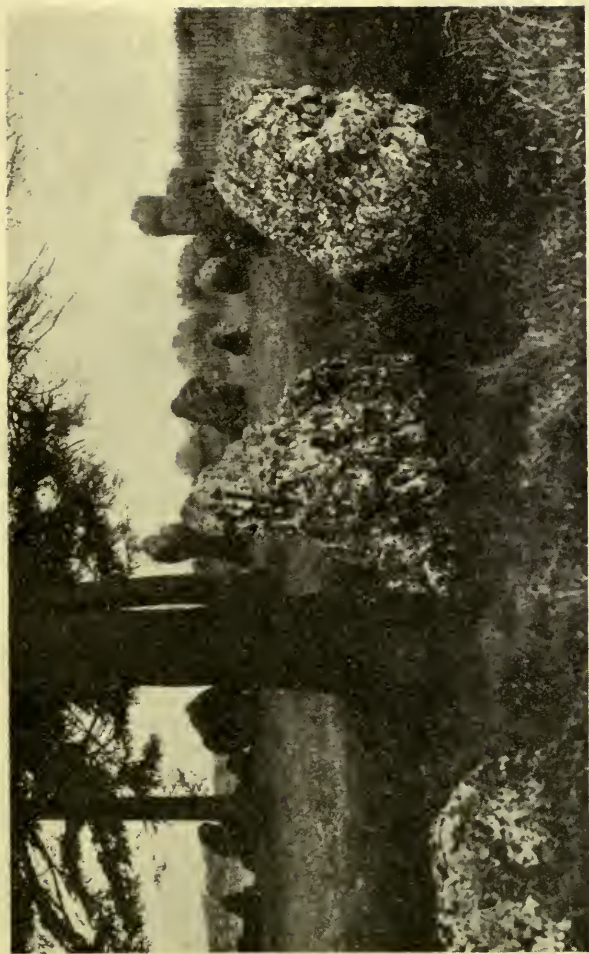
III.

“ Not count the stones ? ” said the kneader of dough,
“ I’ll count them thrice ere to bed I go.
“ A loaf on each I will place with care
“ Counting each as I put it there.
“ Then round I will go and collect the lot
“ And count them again to make sure of the lot.”
He wagered a crown—the bargain was struck,
And a loaf on each Stone of the Circle he put.

One, two, three, four,
Another sixteen make a score,
Thirty, forty, and twenty more
And another five the Circle bore.

“ Five baker’s dozens I’ve placed around
“ And every stone with a loaf is crowned.
“ Now singly with care each loaf remove
“ And count them again the number to prove.”

Ten and ten, and twenty more
Another twenty make three score,
Sixty five we had before
Dozens, fives, the baker score.



Photo—Percy Simms.

PART OF THE CIRCLE.

THE ROLLRIGHT STONES.

"Well thats right," then someone said
"Five twelves are sixty loaves of bread."
The baker was puzzled. "But then you see,
"It was *baker's* dozens I meant" said he,
"I'll take the loaves and go round once more
"Placing each loaf on a stone as before."

That's one, another Two,
Ten, Twenty—count them true,
Thirty, forty, fifty two,
There were just eight stones too few.

The baker looked worried and scratched his head.
"Now we've *four* baker's dozens this time," he said,
"And eight loaves here remain on the ground,
"Where's the other eight stones that last time we found,
"I'll count them again and again, 'Till we
"Have made the stones and the loaves agree."

No sooner said than no sooner done.
He carried the loaves off one by one.
Fifty seven he counted, "Snakes alive
"If I hav'nt re-found the other five.
"Forty seven in hand, and eight on the ground
"Make the sixty five that I first placed round."

So from early dawn until evening fell
So the ancient chronicles truly tell,
With his loaves of bread he went round and round,
But ever a different number found.
Weary and sad he went back to the town,
Having spoilt all his loaves, and lost a crown.

THE ROLLRIGHT LEGENDS,

IV.

Go visit the Rollright on such a night
When the Stones are lit by the pale moonlight.
Softly tread so that none may hear,
Speak not a word—there is naught to fear.

Thou shalt see
Fairies wee,
Elves that ride on the Bumble Bee.
Pixies free
Full of glee,
And a Witch that looks like an Alder Tree.

Yes! The Witch sits there on the altar stone
And cuddles herself and chuckles alone!
Whil'st the wise Owl sits in the fir tree high,
And turns up his eyes to the moon lit sky.

“To-whit To-woo,
“What a great to do.
I'd all go to bed if I were you,
I never knew
Such a rowdy crew,
Or on such a night, such a hullabaloo.”

From stone to stone leap the Elfin folk,
Caring nought for the Ravens croak.
Or the White Owls screech or the Banshees cry
Or the Ghosts that over the Circle fly.

Faster they go
Above and below,
Thousands of “Little Folk” to and fro.
When the East shall glow
And the cock shall crow,
Elves and Fairies and Pixies to bed will go.

But go not near that pile of stone,
Where the Whispering Knights for their sins atone.
They were whispering treason too dire to tell,
When the curse of the Witch on them befell.

So Elf and Fay
Keep far away
From the treacherous Knights, who their King would
But blithe and gay slay.
In the Circle play,
'Till the Witch sends them home at the break of day.



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